

FT View

Crime and punishment

A teacher cuts a student's pants while another splits an eardrum through a hearty slap. These are some of the headlines that shocked readers see in newspapers on a daily basis. How has discipline become such a deplorable act? Why are children punished in such cruel and humiliating ways and what can be done about it?

Sri Lanka's schools are already a morass of problems. Stepping up the fight against corruption and indiscipline in education is necessary not only to keep kids in school and meet literacy and development goals, but also to ensure that the next generation is prepared to be good citizens.

No doubt the majority of teachers are kinder to their students and it is equally likely that students behave in unruly, exasperating and unkind ways deserving of punishment. Yet the challenge is to find a balance between the crime and punishment.

Many schools around the world have banned corporal punishment simply because it is seen as a deeply scarring practice, which will affect the mental and physical wellbeing of a child for years or even possibly the rest of their lives. Most parents do not beat their children nowadays even though they may not have been spared the rod when they were young. Others limit themselves to minor physical punishments.

Yet it is no secret that severe punishments do take place in and outside of school. This is made all the more challenging as drawing the line between punishment and abuse is difficult and often fraught with controversy. Some teachers and parents believe that occasional physical punishment is not a bad idea while others shun it completely.

Policing the standards of what is permissible and what is not often remains complicated. In the incident of a teacher's slapping a child hard enough to split his ear drum has been taken up by the Police but it is unclear how effective this will be in terms of protecting the student in the future if he decides to remain in the same school. What if the teacher is transferred? What will be the fate of students at the new school? Will authorities take any steps to teach the teacher the error of such actions as is done in some developed countries? Is this not an indication that policies also need to change?

National policymakers should understand the teacher is a role model and the school as a microcosm of society, and train teachers to teach by example. The international community and relevant international organisations, such as the World Bank and UNESCO, should prioritise efforts to assist governments in tackling discipline issues. Clearer guidelines need to be adopted on how and how much a child can be punished along with what parameters are acceptable and what others would cross the line.

The role of education is in strengthening personal and professional integrity and capacity as well as traits such as empathy, kindness and care. A student population desensitised by violence is not going to make for a better future.

Sadly, cleaning house in Sri Lanka's education sector is a long, arduous and next-to-impossible process. The harder this goal becomes, the less hope the future has.

Economic diplomacy: Reconnecting the missing link in our foreign policy

EACH country has its own strategies for improving society's economic conditions.

Economic development cannot be achieved overnight through attractive slogans, media blitz and propaganda. It requires a long-term strategy complemented by an attractive political system where all actions of the government and its stakeholders are carried on with transparency and in accordance with the rule of law. It is therefore imperative that good governance practices should be in place so that the country can be marketed overseas in political and economic arena.

Foreign Minister Prof. G.L. Peiris has stated in an interview that there has been some emphasis in attracting foreign investors through a new strategy of pursuing economic diplomacy by our overseas diplomatic corps. It is indeed welcome news if it has succeeded.

It is almost four years since the war was ended and there should be a mammoth increase in our economic activities. The results have not been as satisfactory as one would have expected. The Foreign Minister should be commended for initiating this new strategy which seems to have been articulated at the conference held in Bandarawela for Sri Lankan diplomats.

Holistic approach needed

Art and skill in negotiations play a major role in international trade. This is an area where further improvements can be had. There are a number of academic institutions dedicated to advancing studies in economic diplomacy and negotiations. This subject comes under international relations and Sri Lanka does have the training institutions dedicated for the subject. It is a question of having a holistic approach to the issues that beset the image of Sri Lanka. The country's image is being tarnished by the pro-separatist lobby at every global event that concerns Sri Lanka.

Economic diplomacy should be the primary focus of our diplomats and some performance appraisal measures should be in place to check its effectiveness. It is also imperative to select the best individuals to run our diplomatic missions overseas. It should not be an area for rewards for those who have supported the government agenda whilst on duty. There is a popular perception that those who have favoured the government of the day would be sent overseas as ambassadors. This is a wrong signal given to senior public servants.

Are we fully equipped to face globalisation?

Globalisation has caused mammoth strides in the way in which trade and investments are promoted. It has augmented the importance of economic interdependence among nations. There is greater competition than ever before among nations for a bigger slice of the market. With the advent of communications technology, the economic competition has become even more rigorous compared to what it was a decade back.

Pradeep Mehta, Secretary-General CUTS International,



Where was Sri Lanka's diplomatic protest over the Sethusamudram project? If Sri Lanka is indeed interested in protecting its economic interests, it should have made its presence felt in Delhi

says in his book 'Economic Diplomacy - India's Experience' that it is "concerned with anticipating and influencing the outcomes of future economic policy regimes of other countries. This requires a need for better understanding of the working of market forces in different countries in the given dynamic global economic environment. The process of continuous engagement through economic diplomacy helps a country in advancing its economic interests and, equally importantly, those of its partners. A crucial pre-condition for the successful conduct of economic diplomacy is the existence of a critical pool of skilled personnel in the government, private sector and civil society to understand and negotiate trade, investment and other economic issues from the

national development perspective after taking into account a country's strengths, limitations, opportunities and threats."

Economic diplomacy covers the entire gamut of governance and it is the use of all the economic tools of the state to achieve its economic objectives. Economic diplomacy covers imports, exports, FDI, environment, lending, securing development assistance from donors and signing FTAs with countries with economic benefits to Sri Lanka. It must also protect the interests of the country when it comes to events that have far-reaching economic consequences.

Sethusamudram Project: Where is the diplomatic response from Sri Lanka?

India is actively involved in advancing the Sethusamudram project. What has Sri Lanka done to dash this project? It will have a tremendous economic impact on the shipping trade. All ships plying to and from the eastern and western coast of India navigate around Sri Lanka and often ships call at Port of Trincomalee, Galle or Colombo for cargo, bunkering, repairs and other crew requirements. It is a thriving business for Sri Lankan shipping companies.

Here comes a case of economic diplomacy coupled with official diplomacy. The public interest litigants (PIL) and Hindu

activists have filed cases with Supreme Court of India in an effort to scuttle the project. But the Archaeological Survey of India had stated that there is no scientific evidence to prove that an ancient bridge had been in existence in this area. Even the committee appointed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh also advised against the project.

What has Sri Lanka done to verify the claim that there is no scientific basis to the ancient bridge? This is case where Hindu sentiments and Indian public opinion could have been mobilised easily. Sri Lanka has not even promoted tourism under the 'Ramayana Trail' as vigorously as tourism industry would have cherished.

If Sri Lanka is indeed interested in protecting its economic interests, it should have made its presence felt in Delhi. Nothing concrete seems to have been done. Perhaps other priorities must have taken precedence at the time the project was mooted by Government of India.

Has the Government of Sri Lanka done an assessment of the economic loss as a result of this new shipping route? Ironically on the Indian side, the economic gains must have been simulated, otherwise the project would not have received the green light from the Government.

Where was the diplomatic protest over this project? Sri Lanka's stance should have been on the historical facts, the massive environmental damage it would cause to natural marine habitation and also on the fact that when the tsunami struck, Kerala coast was spared due to these geographical conditions. Even the International Court of Justice (ICJ) would have been moved against this measure.

Where were the so-called religious-based parties in India at the time? Why did they

not canvass support from Sri Lanka? The street protests were extremely marginal compared to Hindu majoritarian politics. BJP and some other allied parties had protested but it would be interesting to see how BJP would react to this project if it comes to power. Did Sri Lanka produce a report on the project? Do we still have time to voice our concerns?

Economic diplomacy and regaining GSP+ concessions

Now Foreign Minister Prof. G.L. Peiris, an Oxford educated legal luminary, has stated that his main objective in foreign policy is economic diplomacy. This means that the time is opportune to revive our relations with the European Union. The business lobby and Chambers of Commerce must come to the fore and lobby the Government to resurrect the full GSP+ concessions. Of course this would have political ramifications and borders on good governance practices.

There are many domestic issues that would surface if we are really interested in reviving the GSP+ concessions. It is the political will of the Government that counts. Our market share in the EU for apparel exports was taken over by Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. According to studies undertaken by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) we would feel the pinch from next year onwards.

If we increase our exports, we would redeem our ever-increasing debt burden. So the million dollar question is, are we serious about enhancing the image of Sri Lanka abroad? Are we really serious about improving the domestic political situation? Can we really meet the demands of the EU or the international community? Do we consider these as 'foreign conspiracies' as some ministers of the Government who are calling themselves 'patriots' harp on this nonsensical logic?

IPS Executive Director Dr. Saman Kelegama says: "The EU should recognise that democracy building can best come from within rather than being imposed from outside, and should therefore become a supportive facilitator of democracy building and human rights in a non-intrusive manner, allowing South Asia to find its own answers that are consistent with the ethos of the region."

The EU is a powerful organisation with political backing from powerful countries. They would of course resort to the carrot and stick approach as has been the policy of many powerful organisations. A small country like Sri Lanka cannot do much except toe the line and get things done in our favour. What we need now is the restoration of public confidence in the institutions that nurture democracy in Sri Lanka such as Judiciary, media, police and elections.

(This writer is a freelance journalist and a political lobbying and public affairs consultant. He is a member of the American Association of Political Consultants)



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